1: Herskovits E-4,8 (1934) 1937 SV3 Haiti SV3 Mirebalais

[P.66 is blank]

CHAPTER IV

THE SETTING OF HAITIAN LIFE

Since the discovery by the Spaniards that the wealth of Haiti lay rather in cultivating sugar than in the exploitation of gold mines, its dominant economy has been agricultural. In the valley of Mirebalais, as elsewhere in the island, the small cultivator holds the center of the economic stage. In the main he works his own land, inherited from his father or acquired through purchase. He may also cultivate additional plots of ground which he rents, since much of the land expropriated when independence was gained was retained by the State and today is leased for nominal fees.[1]

The life of the Haitian farmer, though hard, is simple and self-contained. With but few exceptions, he supplies all his necessities, for he commands almost the entire range of techniques known to his culture; hence Haitian economy shows a [illegible] the sex division of labor. The day's work begins at dawn, the women rising before the men to prepare coffee, the invariable drink of early morning. When finished with his breakfast, the farmer goes to his field, where, except for the hottest hours, he works until sundown, his one meal being brought to him at about nine or ten o'clock in the morning. His wife meanwhile occupies herself with her household tasks, pounding [illegible] or working in her garden near by.

1: Herskovits E-4, 5 (1934) 1937 SV3 Haiti SV3
Mirebalais

rarest of instances, and only by fixed legal procedure, since mere verbal denial of family rights cannot deprive a person of his inheritance.

Within the immediate family it is the duty of the man to procure food for his wife and children. When his fields have been harvested, the produce is taken to the house and given to the wife, who retains a portion of it for the needs of the household and sells the surplus at the market, using the money to buy clothing and other necessaries for her husband, her children, and herself. A part of the sum she receives may be used to purchase animals to be used for transport, food, or breeding-purposes; and whatever money is left over is saved, particularly if a desirable plot of ground is available, or a mass and ceremony for the ancestors or promised rituals for the gods are in prospect. The woman, who is held to be more thrifty than the man, is thus the banker of the family. Her opinion is prized by her husband, and though a man has the legal right to dispose of a horse or a cow or his own land as he desires, in most households nothing would be done until the wife was consulted. It is true that quarrels often arise concerning family funds held by the wife, especially when a man questions the accounting given him, or on occasion when he wants money to bet on a cock-fight or for drinking or other personal needs whose cost he does not care to have reviewed. But for many men the problem is quite well solved by the expedient of deducting a sum from his earnings without telling his wife that she has not been given the full amount.

It is only in relatively small matters that the membership of a household acts as a self-determining unit. In affairs of greater moment the extended family must figure, for despite the informality of its organization — at least as manifested in Mirebalais — and its lack of legal sanction, its power, especially as lodged in the old folk, is none the less real. It is because of this that it is said: "The peasant consults his elders about everything he does." When a transaction of some im-

b Courlander 8-4 (1827-1855) 1960 SV3 Hai SV3

his "horse" may trample in glowing coals, plunge his hands in boiling oil, or play with red-hot iron bars. For Ogoun Changó is a fire-eater—a deity of the forge and of battle. The deity Legba is characterized as a limping old man. A "horse" possessed by Legba may caveort about on a kind of cane-crutch called a Legba stick. Each loa has his distinctive mark. As the Haitians say, "you learn about the loa by watching his horses."

In addition to having homes in Africa or below the water, most loa have special residing places in Haiti, such as stones, caves, trees, waterfalls, or springs. One may come across a boulder or a bamboo grove sacred to a certain loa, and food offerings are likely to be seen there. Many loa are identified with some specific variety of tree and will "inhabit" all such trees throughout the country. Loa Calbasse, for example, lives in the calabash tree, and Loa Général Briséé in the charalette tree. Offerings to these deities are set out underneath the tree or hung in its branches, and services may be held around the trunk.

Loa also live in the old Carib and Arawak celts which are found from time to time. These "loa stones," as they are called, are identified by their forms and their ability to pass certain tests. Some Haitians declare the stones must be able to "whistle," to perspire when blown upon, and to "talk." The loa stones ordinarily are passed on from one generation to another, in the houngfor and in the peasant hut alike. In this way the loa who inhabit them are inherited. Sometimes, but rarely, stones are sold; disposing of a loa stone requires an elaborate ceremony to guarantee that the seller will not be injured by the loa, who is likely to feel "wounded." In such a ceremony the loa is fed and placated and asked to go his way in peace. The loa stones are sometimes called "thunder stones," in the belief that they were hurled to earth by the deities Kebiosu, Sobo, and Changó (all of whom had similar functions among the Arada and Yoruba peoples of West Africa). The stones are cared for by their owners with the greatest reverence.

Loa are acquired by individuals in various ways. Many Haitians hold that every infant is born with a *maît' tête*—a spirit who is "master of the head." In this light, no individual is without a loa, although the deity may never manifest interest in the individual by an act of possession. A man may acquire a loa in the course of his life, although in that event the original maît' tête must be retired from his head. The "inherited" loa are usually not the personal deities but the special protectors of the household or the houngfor and are known as "loa of the house" or "family loa."

Should a man acquire a new loa to replace the old as his maît' tête, he must undergo a ceremony known as *lavé tête*—the "washing of the head." The old loa is retired and sent away, leaving the field clear for the new